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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the relationship between the educational environment and the gifted student's motivation. It argues for less use of competition as a motivator, and suggests future research directions. The argument against employing competition as a motivator is based upon the premise that development, cognitive, social-emotional, and moral, should be the aim of education for all students and that following this goal will lead toward maximum use of the gifted student's intellectual powers. Individualistic and competitive goal structures correspond to the psychological states of task-involvement and ego-involvement. The competitive atmosphere fosters a state of ego involvement in which feelings of self-competence depend on being able to beat others, whereas the individualistic environment induces task involvement in which learning is seen as an end in itself and feelings of competence are found in personal improvement. It is possible that competition may serve not as a motivator but as a distraction when a gifted student is working on an appropriately challenging task. Research is needed on the impact of competition on achievement and on the impact of gender differences on the motivating force of competition. (DB)

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Motivation, Competition, and the Goals of Gifted Education:

New Directions for Investigation

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Motivation, Competition, and the Goals of Gifted Education:
New Directions for Investigation

A universal goal of those interested in the psychology and education of gifted children is to assist those children in making full use of their extraordinary potential. However, various groups working on behalf of gifted students approach this goal from different directions. Psychologists tend to focus on the interior mental life (cognitions, emotions, motivations) of the student; educators and parents are more likely to study the educational environments (instruction, programs, curriculum) surrounding the student. An integrative approach calls for studying the impact of the educational environment on the student's mental and behavioral activity, and to determine whether the effects are consistent with the goal of helping gifted students reach the highest level of functioning of which they are capable.

An important concept to be studied in pursuit of this goal, and one where the integrative approach can be especially useful, is motivation. It is motivation which is invoked as the explanation when we ask why a student with great ability is not accomplishing great things. Renzulli (1978) includes it in his three-ring definition of giftedness (as task commitment). Freehill (1981) discusses "zeal" as necessary for the full functioning of talent. The purpose of this paper is to consider the relationship between the educational environment and the student's motivation,

to present the philosophical underpinnings of an argument for less use of competition as a motivator, and to suggest future research directions in this area.

Competition as a Motivator

Gifted children have, almost by definition, a voracious appetite for learning, but it is frequently speculated (e.g. Webb, Meckstroth, and Tolan, 1982; Rogers, 1985) that the encounter with a traditional school, with its norm-referenced evaluation systems and its extrinsic rewards such as gold stars and grades, can actually be detrimental to this intrinsic motivation to learn. Underachievement can be the result, whether it is defined as a large discrepancy between aptitude and achievement or simply as a functioning at the minimum level needed to maintain good grades. In either case, the focus unfortunately becomes "how to motivate gifted children," rather than how to best make use of their intrinsic motivation to learn. It is at this point that competition enters the motivational picture, as a way to motivate gifted children.

Competition generally has a "bad name" in educational literature, but this has not been the case in gifted education. Competition has not been an issue here, perhaps because it is assumed that gifted students will usually win in competition and there is therefore no problem to be studied. When mentioned,

competition is encouraged in the form of academic bowl games and contests (Williams, 1980; Gourley, 1981). My experience in operating university-based programs for gifted students indicates that parents often send a daughter or son to a gifted program because they feel "the competition will do them good."

How does competition function as an academic motivator? Does competitive success in school lead to only positive outcomes? Is competition more appropriate for gifted than other students? Is the use of competition as motivation consistent with progressive goals of gifted education? If competitive motivations do not lead to these goals, what are the motivational alternatives? There are conflicting answers to these questions in the literature on gifted children, competition, and achievement motivation. Attempts to sort out this evidence are consistent with what Feldman (1982) urges as an agenda for research on the gifted: "...somewhere near the top should be the study of the nature and quality of environmental forces as they interact with talent and personality to produce (or prevent) remarkable achievement" (p. 37). It may be that competition is useful as a classroom motivator; however, in sifting through the issues it does seem that competition is an inappropriate structure for the attainment of many important educational goals for the gifted. Some of these goals have been elucidated in a three-stage model of gifted education (Feldhusen & Kolloff, 1978); they include the development of self-motivation and independence in learning, creativity in solving problems, and

a view of oneself as a competent and effective learner. Perhaps an attempt to clarify the above issues will spark further debate in an area which has received too little attention from educators of the gifted.

Philosophical Issues

The argument against employing competition as a motivator for gifted students is based upon the premise that development -- cognitive, social-emotional, and moral -- should be the aim of education for all students (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972; Kuhn, 1979), and that following this premise in the education of the gifted will lead toward the goal of maximum use of their intellectual powers. A philosophy of education based on psychological development as a goal states that the process of education should never be seen as purely a means to some future end such as exams, a good job, or even a contribution to society. The major goal of education should be based firmly in the present development of the individual. As John Dewey (1938) stated, "...preparation... means that a person...gets out of his present experience all that there is in it for him at the time in which he has it" (p. 49). In other words, the potential of the present should never be sacrificed to the goals of the future. The educational process should be valuable in and of itself, and it can be so when the aim of education is seen to be "personal growth, the desire for further

growth, and the understanding of what is required for that growth" (Goodlad, 1979, p. 41). Appropriate goals for education should be those which are intrinsic to the educational process, and individual psychological development is that kind of goal.

Competition appears to lead to a number of psychological and educational outcomes which are not consistent with this developmental philosophy of education. Competitive goal structures in the classroom, with their emphasis on social comparison and normative evaluation, have been shown to have negative effects on the self-worth (Covington & Beery, 1976) and achievement (Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981) of most students. Competition creates winners and losers, and since few can win, the rest must become losers. Within an individualistic goal structure, however, the emphasis is on self-improvement and mastery of the task, and "whether an individual accomplishes his or her goal has no influence on whether other individuals achieve their goals" (Johnson et al., 1981).

Individualistic and competitive goal structures (aspects of the educational environment) correspond to the psychological states of task-involvement and ego-involvement (aspects of the student). Nicholls (1983) provides evidence that competitive atmospheres foster a state of ego-involvement, in which the student views learning as a means to the end of demonstrating higher ability than that of his or her peers, and in which the student's feelings of competence depend on being able to beat others. An

individualistic goal structure, however, is more likely to induce a state of task-involvement, in which the student sees learning as an end in itself, and the basis for feeling competent is improvement in one's own performance.

It seems clear, then, that if one accepts the philosophy of education outlined above, task-involvement is the preferred state to elicit in all students, including the gifted. A task-involved student is one who is engaged in the educational process for its own sake and for the sake of psychological development. A task-involved student is developing in ways that are consistent with important goals of gifted education, and the use of competitive classroom structures is not consistent with those goals.

Related Research and Research Needs

We can see, then, that competition may be detrimental to intrinsic motivation and task-involvement. Might it also be detrimental to the actual achievement performance of gifted students? Previous studies have not directly examined this question. A large number of studies have compared the achievement outcomes of competitive and individualistic goal structures and have found no differences. However, these studies have also tended to look at only low-level, short-term achievement tasks (see Johnson et al., 1981). There is evidence that more complex tasks such as the process of problem solving may well suffer under a

competitive goal structure, even for gifted students. Czikszentmihalyi (1975) noted that "extra" motivational elements such as competition can disrupt the flow of an inherently interesting activity; and Condry and Chambers (1978) suggest that skills which are not yet fully acquired (for example, abstract reasoning and problem solving, for the gifted preadolescent) are more susceptible to disruption from extrinsic factors such as competition. In other words, when a gifted student is working on an appropriately challenging task, competition may serve not as a motivator but as a distraction, pulling the student's attention away from the task to the act of competing against others. More investigation is needed on the effects of competition on performance of complex tasks, including employing a variety of tasks and looking at a wide range of ages.

Another area of needed research is sex differences in response to competition as a motivator. The literature on competitive and individualistic goal structures has largely ignored sex as a variable. While experimental groups are frequently stratified on the basis of sex, potential sex differences in response to the different goal structures has not been investigated. This is somewhat surprising given the frequent evidence in other studies that girls show greater anxiety and lesser achievement in competitive settings than do boys (e.g. Sassen, 1980; Gilligan, 1982). It is likely, but not demonstrated, that any negative effects of competition on the intrinsic

motivation or performance of gifted students would be more severe for girls than for boys.

In summary, then, the educational literature on competitive goal structures has demonstrated numerous negative effects of competition on attitudes and motivations, and some negative effects on achievement. However, these effects have not been shown for gifted students, primarily because differences in achievement or ability have not been addressed. Finally, sex differences have been virtually ignored in this literature, though ample evidence suggests that they would be found.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This look at motivation, competition, and the goals of gifted education leaves us with several specific questions for future research.

1. Are there clear negative effects of competition on the motivation or performance of gifted students?
2. How does academic performance under competition compare to performance under a more individualistic goal structure?
3. Will the sex differences found in reactions to competition also be found between gifted girls and boys?

In general, future research should work to clarify the achievement outcomes and conditions for which competition is a positive or negative factor, and to consider sex and achievement

variables in relation to these factors. Areas to be investigated include the relationship between competitive situations in the classroom and competitiveness as a trait, using a variety of tasks within the different goal structures, looking at other classroom methods and variables which are likely to facilitate task-involvement, and probing the causes for sex differences in response to competition. Finally, encompassing all the above is the philosophical question: should educational goals for gifted students focus more on avoiding competitive situations which foster ego-involvement, or should educators focus on preparing students for a competitive world? It is argued here that while competition may serve a purpose in causing short-term classroom achievement goals to be met by some students, it is at odds with goals of education which would create individuals with the will to learn for the love of learning, individuals who might help make the world a less competitive place.

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